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Views of a Southern Woman

By ADELENE MOFFAT

An Address Before the Third Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

I have been asked to speak for a few minutes at this conference for much the same reason, I suppose, that families at feud with each other in the part of the country from which I came originally choose the county line for the scene of their more explosive undervaluations of each other. The probability of the sheriffs of both counties appearing simultaneously is so small that differences may be discussed in the most carefree manner if only a subconscious sense of geography and a policy of rapid transit across the line be maintained by both sides.

Having been brought up in the South and having lived the latter part of my life in the North, I find myself a Northerner in the South and a Southerner in the North. Since it is this personal point of view that I have been asked to express, I hope I may be forgiven for a too frequent use of the personal pronoun and for quoting personal experiences.

I think because I am both Southern and Northern I am more keenly aware than many of the inconsistencies on both sides—inconsistencies of phrase, of feeling and of policy. It seems to me that one of the most important functions of this association is that it will serve as a clearing house for misunderstandings and misrepresentations.

On this race question we seem to be unable to reach real issues because we are to so great a degree governed by phrases rather than by facts; and most of the facts are new and most of the phrases old. I often wonder if there has ever been outside the realm of religion a cause so phrase-ridden. This would be less deplorable if many of these ready dicta had not become so distorted from their original intention and application that on both sides of the line we believe we think many things we do not think at all.

We are quite sure we have feelings which it has been clearly demonstrated we have not. We think we have race prejudice in the South, but we have not: we have only caste prejudice; the race prejudice is in the North, and the caste prejudice is growing here. The ways in which caste and race prejudice find expression in the North are beyond the comprehension of the Southerner and arouse his humor or his indignation according to the seriousness of the incident; often according to the extent of the hardship inflicted upon the colored person. On the other hand, the Northerner stands amazed and helpless before the incomprehensible mental processes of the Southerner, his utter lack of logic.

I shall never forget the amazement of a young Southern woman when she first came North to discover that a colored woman had been unable to find anyone to make a dress for her. As she turned around from the stamp window in the post office, a large, not too clean, middle-aged "darkey" fell upon her. "You all from the South, isn't you? Well, the Lord certainly have sent you! Won't you please, ma'am, make

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me a dress? I came up here to work in the clothes I'm standing in, thinking I could buy me somethin' or git somethin' made, and the store clothes is all too little and too fancy, and I've been everywhere there is to go an' there ain't anybody will make a dress for colored folks. Ain't that the beatenest?" The young Southern lady thought it was. Of course she made the dress, to the horror of some of her Northern friends, saying to herself: "And this in Massachusetts!" She had been accustomed all her life to see the young girls of good family make money for their Easter offerings by sewing for colored people.

On the other hand, a white trained nurse whom I knew in the South is in settlement work in a neighborhood where there are white and colored. She never asks when a case is reported to her what the complexion of her patient is—she goes to white and colored alike. She will care conscientiously and tenderly for a colored patient and perform all those menial offices glorified by her profession without a thought of doing otherwise, however diseased, ignorant or debased her patient may be, but she will not hand her patient's chart to a colored doctor, though he be immaculate in person, of irreproachable morals, and with an education and an accent which she would boast with pride were as good or better than her own!

The artificiality of the barrier between the two races could be shown by hundreds of better incidents than these. It is this artificiality that creates the problems and prevents each race from having the freedom to work out its own destiny. There is no Negro problem except as we think there is a problem. The problem is a common problem of humanity—it is the problem of bad housing conditions, bad sanitary conditions, bad political conditions, bad industrial conditions, insufficient education, of both white and black.

The white Southerner will come to realize, I think, that what is good for any other race is good for the colored race. There is a growing company of white Southerners who feel that we want for our colored Southerner every advantage and every help, every advancement that has been found to be good for any other handicapped race. The time has gone by, if it ever existed, when there was but one type of Southerner, with but one kind of a political and social creed.

Unfortunately, until comparatively recent times there has been, with one or two notable exceptions, but one kind of Southerner who talked. But the silent minority, silent because speech was useless, has always been larger, I think, than is generally realized, and silence has not prevented thinking. And the thinking begins very early sometimes.

The little daughter of a friend of mine, a child between four and five years old, was watching one of the colored women washing up the hearth in the nursery one morning. The woman sighed. Louise said, "What make you do lak' that, Viney?"

"I reckon I'se tired, honey."

"What makin' you tired, Viney? Is it 'cause you'se always washing up the hearth?"

"I reckon so."

"Is you washing up the hearth all the time 'cause you'se black, Viney?"

"I reckon so."

"Oh, Viney, what's the matter with dis worl' anyhow!"

The bequest of
Daniel Murray,
Washington, D. C.
1925.

It is this "insurgent" element in the South that most needs the help and co-operative sympathy of the North—intelligent, farsighted and progressive co-operation. We feel that the beauty of desolation is all very well; but we like to be sympathized with for present conditions and not for past. We feel that the war was fought a very long time ago, before most of us were born. That forty-five years is a long time to be talking about it. We do not feel in a strong personal way the loss of wealth because we have never had it. We are like the mountaineer who when asked how he was getting on, said: "Oh, tolerable; I'm still a-holding my own. I began with nothin' and I ain't got nothin' yit." What we do want is help to outgrow our prejudices and fears, our hysterical politics, which are the result of having had in our country an institution which we have had to defend to ourselves and to the outer world. The North could give, and has a right to give, a more certain, more vital aid in this direction.

There are two classes North and South, perhaps I should say one class, who form a serious obstacle to the right and speedy solution of our Southern problem. These are the charming people, the charming Southerner who makes one believe that nothing can be wrong in a social system where the people are so delightful. "Just leave them alone! They know how to deal with their questions better than anyone else." This is the attitude toward them. There are also the charming, sympathetic Northern people who go down south for the winter or less, and say, almost with an air of virtue, "If I lived in the South I should feel just as the Southerners feel." One is tempted to make the reply of the Italian official to Bismarck, "The explanation is ample, the excuse is insufficient."

I think the progressive party in the South needs, more than it has ever needed, the moral support of the North and its active assistance in a campaign of education. It is most discouraging to see many intelligent Northerners who would not for a moment tolerate in their own State, no matter what the cost, conditions they acquiesce in in the South, accepting the point of view of the least progressive, least thoughtful Southerners, permitting them unhesitatingly to dictate what shall be the attitude of Northerners in the North—sometimes even treating the aggressive prejudices of silly young Southern students as serious questions, instead of mere provincialisms soon worn off by contact with a broader world. One young Southern student at least received a much more wholesome and educative consideration. Soon after her arrival in the North, when her acquaintances were few and her social impulses many, a certain distinguished and delightful New Yorker said to her:

"I am so sorry I can't ask you to come to the tea I am giving in my studio. There is to be a young colored artist there, just returned from Paris; knowing your feeling I thought it would be more polite not to ask you. Perhaps some other time, etc." The young take disappointments hard. The other time never came, and this particular student wondered somewhat wistfully if prejudice paid. Some way or other it didn't seem so fundamental to the preservation of society when she was excluded. If the young colored student had been debarred it would have seemed a patriotic virtue.

The responsibility for race discrimination, whatever the race discriminated against, seems to lie largely upon people who do not hold themselves responsible and who can hardly be held responsible except through an enlightened public conscience—that is to say, the ordinary citizen going about his business or pleasure. A very large responsibility rests upon all agencies for social uplift. If they do not take the right stand it is hard to expect individuals here and there to do so. The encouraging aspect of

the matter is that the difficulties are usually much more imagined than real, and this will be realized sooner or later. In a certain social work, covering a period of some years, there has been the opportunity to observe and compare most interestingly the workings of this unintelligent tendency to race prejudice.

The first to appear on the scene were the Irish, the next were the French-Canadians; upon the approach of the latter the Irish rose in a body and demanded that the French-Canadians be excluded, saying that they did not want them coming there, that they would break up the club if they came, and that many of the best members would leave. The reply of the authorities was: "This institution is open to all nationalities and all creeds. The only basis of admission is good character and good behavior. The French-Canadian members fulfil those requirements. The house is here for those who come to it; if you do not come, then you have nothing to say about how it shall be run." The Irish and French-Canadians soon found that they liked each other very well indeed. The Jews were the next to approach. Both Irish and French-Canadians united against them. Again the management stood firm and the results were the same.

This experience was repeated with more than fifteen nationalities. Finally all combined against the Negro. The management again withstood the combined pressure, saying cheerfully, "If you all leave, the place can still be run for colored people, and if you remain and make it uncomfortable for them or any other nationality you most certainly will be requested to leave." Again the result was the same as on previous occasions. Almost immediately the whole incident was forgotten.

In a social settlement in Cambridge, in a colored and white district, colored and white have been coming to the house in equal numbers for over fifteen years. So little is the question of color thought of that it not infrequently happens that in selecting persons for a play the young people entirely forget that perhaps some of the audience may feel that the dramatic unities are not being altogether preserved, when a flaxen-haired, blue-eyed boy or girl and a very dark colored child elect to be brother and sister in the play. The Woman's Club has always had about an equal number of white and colored members. The colored people are often in greater demand than some of their white neighbors, owing to their agreeable and refined manners.

The distinctive traits of the colored people, those in which they seem to surpass the other nationalities which go to make up the American people, are urbanity, love of music, poetic imagination and social adaptability. Has America so many of these qualities that it can afford to cavil if the gift comes to it wrapped up in brown paper instead of white?

When one looks at what the Negro has accomplished in a generation since the war, when one considers the amount of education he has been able to acquire, the amount of his savings and his investments, when one catches in the literature of his race the strong, clear note of a rising people, a people meaning to rise to the highest American ideals (they know no other), it seems to be no longer a question of the education of the black, but of the education of the educated whites.

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